

Herhold: Urban expert grades charm of S.J. streets

By Scott Herhold

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"This is cool!" said Dan Burden as he strode into the middle of a busy Fourth Street, wielding his measuring tape like a giant yellow wand. "You could have bike lanes on *both* sides of this street."

Accompanied by 20 or so followers who crave more life on urban streets, Burden - a tall, gray-haired man with a drooping mustache and a bright orange vest - was leading what was billed as a "walking audit" of downtown San Jose Monday afternoon.

Not surprisingly, the bottom line was mixed. In its \$2 billion-plus rebuilding of downtown, San Jose has created impressive buildings and urban spaces. In Burden's view, it could still do more to make life livable without spending much.

Like those bike lanes. Fourth Street is a busy one-way artery that funnels southbound traffic onto Highway 280. At the place Burden measured, just south of City Hall, the three traffic lanes are each 14 feet wide: Burden suggests they should be no more than 10 feet wide, slowing the traffic and allowing room for 7-foot-wide bike lanes.

Safer street

"Now you've got a safer street that handles all the current capacity and actually does a better job," Burden says. "You could go out next Monday, write a purchase order and put them in."

If you sense a counterintuitive bent to Burden's remarks, you aren't wrong. Rearranging the furniture in an urban area departs sharply from the suburban thinking that has guided San Jose's growth.

As the director of an organization called Walkable Communities, Burden is a nationally recognized authority on urban design for pedestrians and bicyclists. Having performed some 4,000 walking audits, he was brought to San Jose by 1stAct Silicon Valley, the arts umbrella group that hopes to spark downtown with what it calls "small wonders" and "big deals."

Monday's tour dealt loosely with small wonders - the potential of making life more appealing for pedestrians. Burden delivered his advice in a genial tone that didn't parse many words.

"San Jose has way too many one-way streets," he said as he inspected Third and Fourth streets. "It's OK to honor a freeway on-off ramp, but to have your speeds too high is not a good thing."

Then there's the matter of wide driveways. As we passed one that led into the Paseo condominium complex, Burden pulled out his tape and measured 26 feet. "That's a lot of distance in which you're exposed" to oncoming cars, he said, suggesting coloring the driveway to make it more apparent.

Security

What does work in Burden's experience? The Walkable Communities director - who says his favorite city is Victoria, British Columbia - believes devoutly in buildings that watch over public spaces. He likes the interplay between the Paseo condos and the sidewalk on Third Street. He dislikes the reflective glass in the state office building, one of downtown's ugliest structures.

Burden likes a downtown with fun. When we passed by the exit doors of the Camera 12 Theaters on First Street, he suggested they looked like crypts. A piece of art that played on that theme - or one like it - would create more interest for visitors.

Above all, he suggests that San Jose tip the balance toward people rather than cars, slowing things to a more human pace. He puts it very simply. "If you build your community for cars, you'll have a lot of cars," he said. "If you build it for people, you'll have a lot of people."

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